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AUTHOR Smith, Suzanna D.
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ABSTRACT

In the Double ABCX Model, family stress is defined as an imbalance in demands (the A factor: stressor event, related hardships, prior strains), and capabilities or resources (the B factor). The family's definition (C factor) of the imbalance influences its impact. When the family is unable to balance demands and capabilities without making a change in its structure and interaction patterns, a crisis (X) occurs. The Double ABCX Model as a theory of family stress presents some problems: unclear definitions of concepts; a structural, static model; and the fact that the theory is actually not a theory, but a scale model. These conceptual and theoretical weaknesses limit the usefulness of this model. Potential solutions to some of these problems can be found in a transactional paradigm which represents human behavior as a relational process between the person and the environment, and which captures the dynamic process of response to stress. Family paradigms as regulators of family-environment transactions, stages of the coping process, and variables affecting coping are promising areas of study. (NRB)

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Family Stress Theory:

Review and Critique

Suzanna D. Smith

Department of Child and Family Development

University of Georgia

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FAMILY STRESS THEORY: REVIEW AND CRITIQUE

ABSTRACT

There has been a growing interest in family stress, particularly variables affecting family response to life cycle events as well as crises. The Double ABCX Model has been readily accepted as an appropriate theory, and guides most contemporary family stress research. This paper questions the usefulness of the Double ABCX Model. In particular, concerns are raised about unclear definitions and concepts and the static nature of the model. The Model as a bona fide theory is challenged. Other models of stress are reviewed and a transactional paradigm is proposed as an alternative.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF FAMILY STRESS THEORY

In his 1949 study of the effects of separations and reunions on wartorn families, Hill described a set of variables and their interactions to explain the events leading up to a family crisis. According to Hill (1958; p. 143), the process followed a pattern of:

> A (the event) interacting with B (the family's crisis meeting resources) interacting with C (the definition the family makes of the event) produces X (the crisis).

This work firmly established family crisis as an area of interest and began a tradition of theoretical and empirical inquiry into family stress, a tradition that has been basically unchanged for the last 30 years (McCubbin, et al., 1980).

Several theoretical articles on family stress appeared after Hill's (1949) first presentation of the ABCX Model (e.g., Hansen & Hill, 1964; Hill, 1958). It was, however, Burr's (1973) modification of the ABCX Model and synthesis of family stress research into a theoretical framework that rekindled an interest in the subject and provided the impetus for further theory-building (McCubbin, et al., 1980).

Unlike Hill, who concentrated on the B and C factors, Burr focused on X, the crisis, claiming there had been no systematic explanation of how and why the crisis varies. The X factor was redefined as the amount of crisis, the variation in the degree of disruption and disorganization, that has come about from a family's inability to prevent change in the family system. Two concepts were considered critical in a family's reaction to crisis: (a) vulnerability, or ability to withstand the initial impact of a stressor depending on the family's resources; and (b) regenerative power, or the family's ability to recover following a crisis.

In their "rethinking" of family stress theory Hansen and Johnson (1979) reviewed and critiqued Burr's model, particularly unclear definitions, inconsistent conceptualization, and implications of the dysfunctional definition of crisis. In turn, they developed a new set of propositions to guide further research.

The primary focus of this work was the C factor, definition of the situation, considered central to family interaction and communication under stress. The authors elaborated on McHugh's (1968) concepts of "emergence" and "relativity" to describe fluctuations in the family's definition, and developed new models and propositions to test their theory. Hansen and Johnson admitted that the explanatory and predictive power of their synthesis was untested, and recommended that further research incorporate some of their ideas.

CONTEMPORARY FAMILY STRESS THEORY: THE DOUBLE ABCX MODEL

The Double ABCX Model grew out of a concern for methodological and conceptual inadequacies in contemporary studies of family stress. In particular, emphasis has been placed on conceptualizing family stress

as a dynamic process of adjustment. A postcrisis stage has been added to the original precrisis model, representing ongoing adjustment following a crisis, which occurs when a family is unable to prevent change. Four factors represent the "Double" in the ABCX Model, and variability in the family's ability to recover: (a) pile-up of stressors; (b) family efforts to acquire new resources; (c) modifications of definition of the situation; and (d) results of coping strategies (McCubbin & Patterson, 1982). To portray family adjustment over time the Double ABCX Model has been imbedded in a larger framework, "family adjustment and adaptation response," or FAAR. A somewhat simplified version of the Double ABCX-FAAR Model highlighting these four factors is presented in Figure 1, and some of the major points are reviewed below. For a more detailed discussion the reader is referred to McCubbin and Patterson (1982).

Insert Figure 1 here

In the Double ABCX Model family stress is defined as an imbalance in demands (the A factor: stressor event, related hardships, and prior strains), and capabilities or resources (the B factor). The family's definition (C factor) of the imbalance, however, influences its impact. When families define the imbalance positively (e.g., as an opportunity for growth) they experience eustress; when they view the situation as unpleasant they experience distress.

Stress may never become a crisis if the family uses resources and definitions to resist change in the family system. When first confronted with stressors, coping strategies are used to resist the stressor.

However, when the family is unable to balance demands and capabilities without making a change in its structure and interaction patterns, a crisis (X) occurs. Following a crisis, new coping strategies must be employed to enable the family to adapt, i.e., to reorganize and regroup (restructure and consolidate) as new rules, patterns of communication, and roles are established. The outcome of family efforts to achieve a new balance varies along a continuum from bonadaptation to maladaptation, depending on the "fit" between resources and demands at the individual, family, and community levels.

CRITIQUE OF THE DOUBLE ABCX MODEL

In the last 10 years the DOUBLE ABCX Model has become the predominant theory of family stress, despite weaknesses that limit its usefulness. Some of the problems are unique to the DOUBLE ABCX Model; others have been inherited from previous theory-building efforts. The weaknesses of the theory fall into two general categories, conceptual and theoretical. Specifically, the major problems are: (a) definitions of concepts are circular or unclear; (b) the model is structural and static rather than processual and dynamic; and (c) the theory is not a theory, but rather a scale model, a simile rather than a metaphor.

Conceptualization

The first conceptual problem is the circularity of concepts. Stressors are often indistinguishable from the family's response to those stressors. The source of stress is not inherent in the stressor but is part of the family's response, particularly when the stressor is a traumatic event and a family reaction might include interpersonal conflict or highly charged emotional responses (McCubbin, et al., 1980). In short, we know a stressor is a stressor when it makes people stressed. McCubbin and

colleagues raised this issue in their decade review of family stress theory, but apparently have not resolved it.

The circularity problem emerges again in families' definitions of the demand-capability imbalance. Recall that if families define the situation as an opportunity for growth they experience eustress; if they see the situation negatively they experience distress. Thus, if a stressor causes growth it isn't a stressor, as change in the family system is resisted.

This brings us to the concept and definition of crisis. In the Double ABCX Model crisis refers to a family's inability to prevent change. Yet it seems that the real crisis would come with a family's inability to change; that is, stasis, rigid boundaries, and/or lack of growth.

In spite of efforts to expand the definition of crisis (X) to include responses to normative as well as catastrophic events, its implicit meaning--disruption and trauma--remains. In part this is supported by the empirical literature, which has been focused on families who are undergoing severe to moderate hardships, such as families of Vietnam soldiers missing-in-action (McCubbin, Dahl, Lester, Benson, & Robertson, 1976) and of those with hospitalized children (McCubbin, McCubbin, Patterson, Cauble, & Warwick, 1983). Meanwhile, little attention has been given to responses to chronic, ongoing stressors of varying intensities, the kind of stress families experience daily and throughout the life cycle (Fried, 1982).

Other conceptual problems arise with the C factor, definition of the situation. Although Hansen and Johnson (1979) emphasized definitional aspects of family stress, several problematic issues were not addressed

and remain troublesome. Whose definition is most important, the individual's or the family's? How does the individual member's definition influence the family? How does the family incorporate, modify, or change the individual's definition? What is a group definition and by what process might it emerge in families? How do ethnic identity and history, and ties with kin groups and other social systems outside the family influence its definition? Other scholars have disputed the very importance and appropriateness of the position of the concept in the model (Oliveri & Reiss, 1981).

Proponents of the Double ABCX Model would attempt to convince us of their dynamic approach. Unfortunately, like their predecessors, they have ended up with static, structural conceptualizations. How individuals, families, and communities influence each other is unclear, although this "fit" is central to the adjustment-adaptation process. For example, individual family members' actual participation in adjustment and adaptation is not described and certain questions about the process arise: How does one family member convince the unit it is time to change? How does individual symptomology affect family adjustment? Similar questions arise about the family-community fit: How does the family seek out external resources? What are the consequences, in terms of adaptation, of not doing so? How will variations in kinship ties and community patterns (e.g., openess; integration) affect family adjustment?

In summary, conceptualization of family stress variables continues to be troubled by tautological and unclear definitions, and does not capture the process of responding to family stress. The model is also

limited by its theoretical construction and assumptions, as discussed below.

Theory Construction

A theory is a metaphor for human behavior describing the world "as if" it is so, not as it "is" (Reese & Overton, 1970), enabling the theoretician to explain and predict, not merely describe. Scale models, on the other hand, only describe relations among variables. Although scale representations may be accurate, because they depend on measured properties they do not provide rules of inference nor increase the scope of the theory (Reese & Overton, 1970). The Double ABCX Model is a simile, a scale representation of variables, not a metaphor for human behavior. As a taxonomy, the Model is limited to descriptions about structural relations, not a theory about process, and is not able to explain and predict.

The paradox is that there has been a concerted effort among proponents of the DOUBLE ABCX Model to present families under stress as dynamic systems in the process of adaptation (see McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). Families have been assumed to be holistic systems that grow and change over time as a result of individual, family, and community interactions. Without elaborate networks of feedback loops and intervening variables, however, the model becomes a mechanistic, cause and effect sequence beginning with the onset of a stressor event and resulting in crisis. Although it has been made clear that the emphasis is on what influences the variability in crisis (McCubbin et al., 1980; McCubbin & Patterson, 1983), the structure of the Model itself is inherently sequential and focused on a chain of events rather than

an interplay among variables which gives a family's adjustment a unique quality.

Coyne and Lazarus (1980) have identified a fundamental restriction on presumably dynamic and organismic models. As long as person and environment variables are assumed to exist separately and prior to their connection with each other, attention is focused on action and reaction, cause and effect, rather than reorganization and redefinition (Coyne & Lazarus, 1980).

In the case of family stress theory, person and family environmental variables are assumed to exist separately and prior to their connection with each other, and as a result, attention is focused on action and reaction or, cause and effect. There are several examples of this. First, humans have been assumed to be actors shaping their environment, not reactors to it (McCubbin et al., 1980). The possibility of a continuous, mutual give and take has not been discussed. Second, although environmental variables have been included in the periphery of the FAAR Model as sociocultural, situational, and developmental stressors they are not basic to it. There is no way of knowing when these factors become relevant nor how they impact, although we might guess that these would be some of the most important sources of variability in coping. Finally, although the fit between family and community has been emphasized (McCubbin et al., 1980; McCubbin & Patterson, 1982) each is presented in terms of an independent, identifiable contribution to the interaction. The possibility of on-going, mutual transformations has not been examined.

One of the most obvious and difficult problems with the Double

ABCX Model is its complexity. As with previous models (e.g., Burr, 1973; Hansen & Johnson, 1979) simplicity and parsimony have been sacrificed for new concepts, elaborations of key variables, and an intricate and complicated format (FAAR). The complexity of the FAAR Model in particular makes explanation, clarification, and operationalization of variables difficult and confusing. The Double ABCX emphasis on structural components and sequences of adaptation diverts attention from the actual process of adjustment.

OTHER MODELS OF STRESS

The Double ABCX Model is but one piece of a growing body of literature on stress. Major empirical findings from other fields, such as the influences of chronic stress, life satisfaction, and mastery and self-esteem have been mentioned or implicitly incorporated into the Double ABCX Model.

A first attempt at interdisciplinary cooperation has been made by including chapters by authors from other disciplines in a recent volume on family stress and social support (see McCubbin, Cauble, & Patterson, 1982). Interdisciplinary integration, however, is lacking. This is particularly unfortunate because potential solutions to some of the problems in the Double ABCX Model can be found in the psychologically-oriented transactional, cognitive-phenomenological model proposed by Lazarus, Overill, & Opton (1974).

The uniqueness of the transactional paradigm is its representation of human behavior as a relational process between the person and the environment, and its ability to capture the dynamic process of response to stress. Human behavior is neither reactive nor active, but transactive. Individuals use cognitive processes to adjust to a

continually changing environment and the environment is progressively modified by the individual in the process of change. Prior knowledge of person or of the environment is inadequate; person and environment are described relationally.

Coyne and Lazarus (1980) use transactionalism as a general framework for cognitive phenemenology, a more detailed theoretical model outlining specific phases of cognitive processes in coping. The process is a series of questions and behaviors: (a) Am I O.K. or am I in trouble? (b) What can I do about it? (c) What's changed? (d) How can I cope?... I'll try this. (e) How did that work? (For more detail see Belle, 1982, and Coyne & Lazarus, 1980).

In this framework stress is not the onset of a particular event nor an element in an elaborate structural scheme; stress is part of an ongoing person-environment transaction. The emphasis is on the individual's interpretation of and response to change, and the factors that most influence this process. From the transactional/cognitive phenomenological perspective stress does become a process; it is also not a "thing" like an event.

An obvious concern about using this model with family stress is its emphasis on cognitive processes. The model is, however, general enough to act as a framework for family interactions and a preliminary application of the model to families has been quite successful (see Belle, 1982, and Dill & Feld, 1980). Furthermore, concepts or issues that are central to family stress theory, such as demand-resource balance, definition of the situation, and variables influencing regenerative power, are included in the cognitive phenomenological

model, but without the trappings of a complex, highly-structured framework.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The transactional paradigm is recommended as an overreaching theory for family-environment transactions, and the more specific cognitive-phenomenological theory for family coping. The work of David Reiss and his colleagues (Oliveri & Reiss, 1981; Reiss & Oliveri, 1980) on family paradigms may provide the framework for a transactional analysis of family stress.

According to Oliveri and Reiss (1980; p. 433) families develop shared world views called family paradigms, an ordered set of beliefs about the social world that are "sensibly connected to the ways families actually respond to and interact with their social world" and which help or hinder their problem-solving abilities. Evidence suggests that these paradigms are generally "built in and enduring" and regulate transactions with the family's social environment. Under stress, however, a family may alter its paradigm as a result of transactions with the environment. The family's conceptualization of itself in relation to the world becomes more basic, clear, and simple. The paradigm comes to the foreground rather than being a background coordinator of daily events and actions. At this point a new paradigm may emerge and in turn becomes the background and orientation for daily problem-solving and the stabilizing force for the family under stress.

Oliveri and Reiss (1980:434) have, in effect, provided the conceptual link between individual and family cognitions: "Face-to-face relationships cannot go forward without a reconciliation,

integration, and shared development of the basic premises of these personal theories." The shared family world view is the result of the progressive integration of members' definitional systems into the family paradigm.

With this framework in place, the ABC variables, demands (A), resources (B), and definition of the situation (C), can be integrated into The Coping Process. An imbalance between demands and resources would create tension and families would respond with a definition of the situation as "O.K." or "troublesome." Definition of the situation thus becomes an ongoing part of the family's response to the environment, initiating other coping processes when necessary and continuing throughout the coping process. Oliveri and Reiss (1980) also have integrated definition of the situation into the coping process, noting that it ends only when family problem-solving decisions are complete.

One criticism of the Double ABCX Model has been the interpretation of the crisis (X) as the family's inability to prevent change. It was suggested that a crisis might actually be a family's inability to change. This redefinition, however, continues to focus on family structure and the sequential outcome (xX), i.e., various levels of adaptation. A more meaningful definition of crisis might be the family's inability to cope. The central interest of family stress then becomes the variables affecting coping. (Although by extension outcomes will be important, the more immediate task is to identify the variables that shape the coping process.)

Oliveri and Reiss (1980) have described family paradigms along three dimensions, configuration, coordination, and closure. These

dimensions may be reframed as variables in the coping process. Configuration refers to patterns of organization and order which are related to mastery of the environment; coordination is the degree of synchrony and solidarity among members; closure is degree of openness and delay in final decision-making. In the case of a demand-resource imbalance each variable will influence definition of the situation, attempts at solutions, and evaluation of results. As part of the enduring family paradigm these variables will shape a family's ongoing transactions with the environment. Incorporating these variables into paradigms and/or the coping process also begins to incorporate more fully the important variables, mastery and self-esteem, into the family stress process. Although both variables have been included in the Double ABCX Model, their documented importance (Dill, Feld, Martin, Benkerna, & Belle, 1980; Pearlin, Menaghan, Leiberman, & Mullan, 1981) has not been emphasized.

A new model and diagram are not proposed here. Clarification of the most useful concepts and simplification of a theoretical framework are recommended. Family paradigms as regulators of family-environment transactions, stages of the coping process, and variables affecting coping are promising areas of study.

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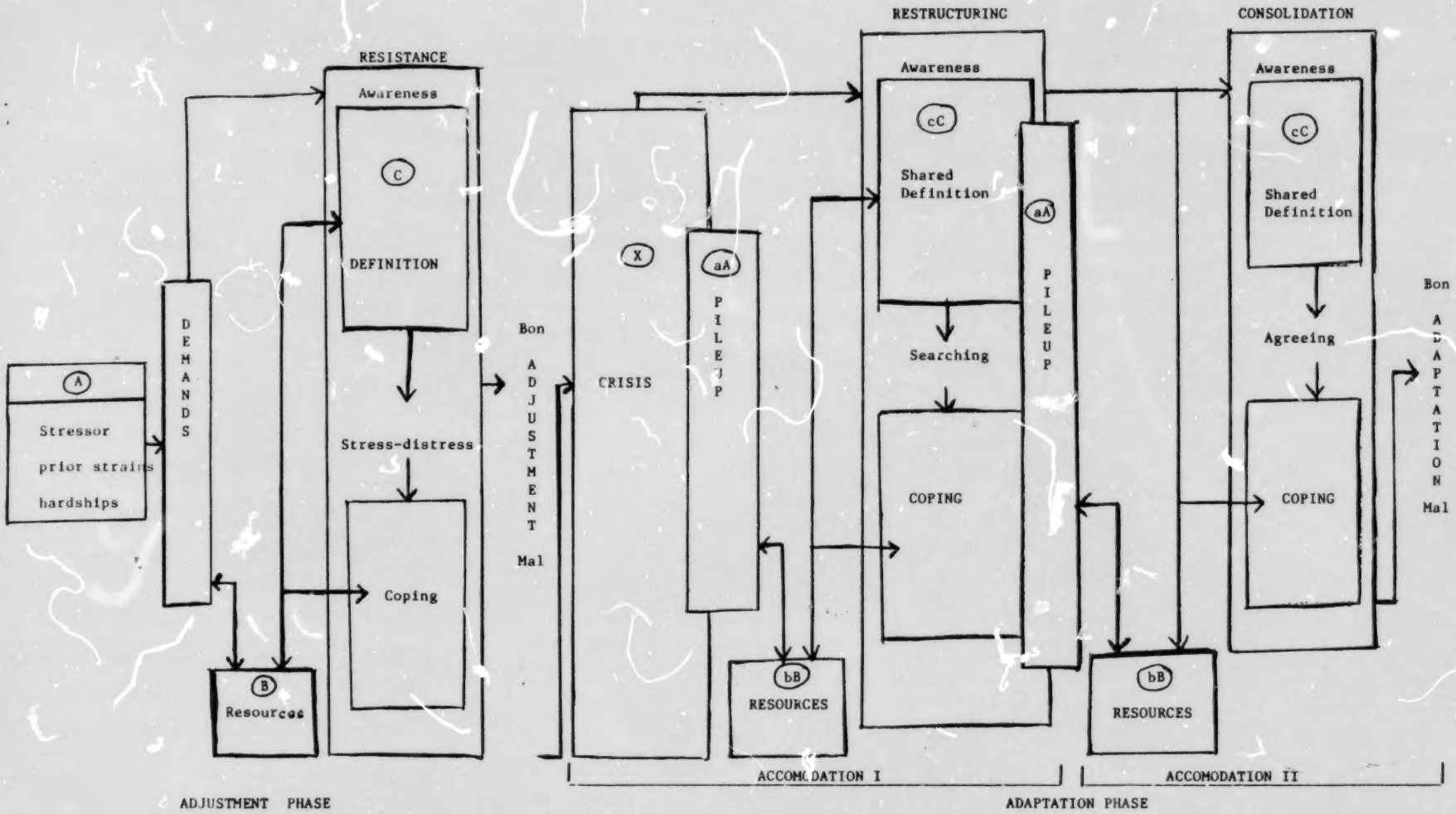

Figure 1. Highlights of the Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response (FAAR)

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